

Getting Back to Premodern Japan

Tanabe's Reading of Dōgen

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“Listen to the clapping of *one* hand!”¹ On 18 May 1958 Martin Heidegger used this *kōan* of Zen master Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1686–1769) to conclude a seminar he had taught jointly with the Rinzai Buddhist Hisamatsu Shin'ichi 久松真一 (1889–1980). Though taken from a Buddhist source, Heidegger hinted at the importance of its meaning for “us” today insofar as it hints at where “the Japanese already are” and have been for centuries—namely, living in the culture of Zen. Throughout his own philosophical thought he tried to reach out to where “they” are by seeking the “undefiled” source of a “saying” that is not trapped by Western metaphysical terminology.² This is why Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, and in particular Chan and Zen, attracted his attention for a period, during which his Asian students “served” as his primary conduit to ancient sources by providing him with translations from the

1. Cited here as an English rendering of Heidegger's wording. See M. HEIDEGGER and S. HISAMATSU, “Die Kunst und das Denken. Protokoll eines Colloquiums am 18. Mai 1958 (A. Guzzoni),” in H. BUCHNER, ed., *Japan und Heidegger: Gedenkschrift der Stadt Meßkirch zum 100. Geburtstag Martin Heideggers*, (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1989), 215.

2. Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache,” in his *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Stuttgart: Neske, 1993), 87.

original texts. Meantime, Heidegger tended to neglect modern Japanese writings, such as those of his contemporary Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945). One may wonder why Heidegger did not work his way step by step from the modern world of Europe to modern Japan, and then probe further back to, say, medieval sources. What made him think he could jump directly into the highly specialized field of premodern Asian thought to deal with something like Zen, and then be able to make sense of peculiar aspects such as the *kōan*, whilst bypassing the vast discursive resources of the Buddhist tradition from which it was born?

Here I will take up a more gradual approach to the complexities of Zen by way of the thought of one of Heidegger’s visitors from the East. In contrast to Nishida, who was unsystematic in his allusions to Asian sources, his student, Tanabe Hajime 田辺 元 (1885–1962), worked out in the 1930s an interpretation of the thinking of the prominent medieval Japanese Buddhist monk Eihei Dōgen 永平道元 (1200–1253), founder of the Japanese Sōtō Zen sect.

Tanabe began by consciously following in the footsteps of an earlier interpretation of Dōgen worked out by Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960), a cultural historian who was one of the first to see the philosophical import of the monk’s long-neglected writings.³ That said, Tanabe is probably the first prominent *philosopher* to suggest a metaphysical interpretation of Dōgen and to demonstrate how his speculations surpass a great deal of Western philosophy and Asian thought. Like Watsuji he tried to uncover the premodern sources of *Japanese* philosophy, not in order to insulate his homeland’s culture from the growing influence of modern Western culture, but in order to open it up and make a contribution to a wider “world culture.” Generally acknowledged as one of the few Japanese thinkers to inherit the *dharma* of a Chinese master and develop a distinctive style of Zen in Japan, Dōgen stands as one of those frontier thinkers who serve to distinguish the thought of Japan from that of its “big brother” China.

Tanabe’s and Watsuji’s interpretation share a central focus: both concentrate on Dōgen’s conviction that language, *dōtoku* 道得, represents

3. Cf. R. MÜLLER, “Watsuji Tetsurō et la découverte de la philosophie pré-moderne,” in J. Tremblay, *Philosophes du Japon au 20e siècle* (2007, forthcoming).

“the perfect expression of Buddhist truth.” Dōgen’s speculations in his magnum opus, the *Shōbōgenzō*, suggest a concept of philosophy in many ways similar to the Western idea of *logos*. At the same time, his work is commonly taken to be exceptionally important in the tradition of Chinese and Japanese Zen.

Zen is often regarded as dismissing language, underscoring its dismissal through the use of the *kōan* to mark off the boundaries of speech and writing. That at least is the way the *kōan* are viewed by many intellectuals who have taken Zen to be a kind of mysticism. The misunderstanding dates back to the spread of Rinzai (Chin. Linji) Zen, a sect that gives priority to the use of *kōan* in the rigorous training of its monks. Rather than fall into this negative appraisal of *kōan* usage, Dōgen makes extensive use of them, weaving a considerable number of them into his otherwise analytic, rational, and discursive prose. One might say that Dōgen inverted the traditional Zen axiom of “seeing into one’s nature, *without* relying on words and letters” by advancing insights and explanations that rely heavily on “words and letters.”

In what follows I would like to present Tanabe’s interpretation of Dōgen as one example of how to read him as a philosophical resource, more particularly, as a resource for *Japanese* philosophy. Dōgen’s treatment of language and Tanabe’s corresponding treatment of Dōgen’s use of “words and letters” will only be touched upon briefly here. My primary concern will be to throw light on some historical aspects of Tanabe’s interpretation.

THE HISTORY OF DŌGEN’S RECEPTION

It is important to note that when philosophers—as was the case with Heidegger—become interested in Asian thought, they tend to head directly to the sources and not bother with the secondary literature. In the case of Dōgen, early twentieth-century interpretations such as those of Watsuji and Tanabe are treated with benign neglect. At best they are relegated to footnotes, there to receive a modicum of recognition when they agree with an author’s interpretation. Their actual argu-

ments are left to one side. This becomes clear as one takes a closer look at how Zen has figured in Western intellectual history.

At least as far as the German reception of Dōgen is concerned, it may be said that his influence was minor compared to that of Rinzai Zen. Ever since the publication in 1925 of *Zen: Der lebendige Buddhismus in Japan* by Ōhazama Shūei 大巖秀栄 with a foreword by the celebrated scholar Rudolf Otto, Zen has been narrowed down to Rinzai and its characteristic use of *kōan*. In the earliest accounts of Japanese Zen published in German, however, both schools were given equal attention. Dōgen's biography was extensively laid out for the first time in Germany in 1904 by the Protestant Hans Haas, who translated Dōgen's instructions for *zazen* ten years later. After reading the book, another important figure in religious studies, Friedrich Heiler, dismissed Dōgen's approach to meditation as Buddhism in a stage of atrophy. He felt that Dōgen had reduced Zen to little more than a primitive form of psychotherapy. In consequence of Heiler's influence, the monk was ignored for another twenty years.

Up to 1945, the sole positive philosophical account of Dōgen was to be found in a brief work by Kitayama Jun'yū 北山淳友 (1902–1962). In 1940 Kitayama published his translation of the *Genjōkōan*, which he dedicated to Otto, claiming it to be “one of the greatest and most important masterworks of Buddhist mysticism and philosophy.”⁴ In the same year, Takechi Tatehito 武市健人 (1901–1986), another Japanese living in Germany at that time, mentioned the *Shōbōgenzō* in a short description of the philosophy of the Kyoto School. Already in this article we find a reference to the work of Tanabe, citing the 1939 work, “My View of the Philosophy of the *Shōbōgenzō*.” In Takechi's words, Tanabe “regards Dōgen as the precursor of *his own* logic of absolute mediation,”⁵ a comment that will find an echo among later critics of Tanabe's interpretations.

4. KITAYAMA Junyu, “Genjō Kōan. Aus dem Zen-Text *Shōbō genzō* von Patriarch Dōgen,” *Quellenstudien zur Religionsgeschichte* 1 (1940): 1.

5. TAKECHI Tatehito, “Japanische Philosophie der Gegenwart,” *Blätter für Deutsche Philosophie. Zeitschrift der Deutschen Philosophischen Gesellschaft* 14/3 (1940): 298; emphasis added.

After the war, Oscar Benl in the field of Japanese studies and Heinrich Dumoulin in religious studies were the first directly to engage Dōgen's thought. From a standpoint he called "religious metaphysics," Dumoulin related Dōgen to the ancient traditions of China and India, undisturbed by reproaches against the paradoxical logic he saw in them. The same holds true for the ground-breaking work on Dōgen done by Hee-Jin Kim for a 1965 doctoral thesis and later revised for publication in 1975. He terms Dōgen a "mystical realist," devising any number of enigmatic explanations of what he meant by the phrase.

Kim's account of Dōgen's life and thought remains the most detailed account in Western scholarship.⁶ He provides the reader with a short summary of the history of the reception of Dōgen, in the course of which he mentions the name of Dōgen's discoverer to whom we referred earlier, Watsuji Tetsurō. The publication of Watsuji's essays in 1926 gave impetus to the broad reception of Dōgen in the intellectual history of modern Japan. Kim cites Tanabe in this connection: "Indeed his thought seems to have already had an insight into, and to have made a declaration of, the direction to which the systematic thought of today's philosophy should move."⁷ Unfortunately, other than that Kim overlooks the cultural and political implications of Tanabe's interest in Dōgen.

Neither Tanabe nor Watsuji were the first to read Dōgen from a philosophical point of view. One can go back as far as Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) who published an *Outline of the Philosophy of the Zen Sect* (禪宗哲學序論) in 1893, in which he treats Dōgen as a philosopher on the matter of the relationship between the relative and the absolute. In articles published in 1902 and 1906 in the Sōtō Zen journal *Wayūshi* (和融誌, later renamed *Zengaku zasshi* 禪學雜誌, and once again *Daiichigi* 第一義) other aspects of Dōgen's thought, such as his "anthropology," are taken up. Finally, as early as 1911 we find essays by Yodono Yōjun 淀野耀淳 (1879–1918) on Dōgen's philosophy and religion in the pages of

6. On Kim and other English works, see Thomas P. KASULIS, "The Zen Philosopher: A Review Article on Dōgen scholarship in English," *Philosophy East and West* 28/3 (1978).

7. Hee-Jin KIM, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 3.

Eastern Philosophy (東洋哲學), drawing attention to Dōgen's place in Zen history and examining themes found in his philosophy.⁸

Yodono stressed Dōgen's reflections on language, not confining himself to the remarkable way he used the Japanese language itself. Citing Dōgen's criticism of the traditional Zen idea of a transmission beyond the spoken or written word,⁹ Yodono distinguishes him from *kōan*-based Zen but at the same time locates him implicitly within the wider Asian tradition. As the journal title indicates, the idea of a *Japanese* philosophy, as distinct from *Eastern* philosophy in general, had not yet taken hold.

TANABE'S APPROACH

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of *Japanese* philosophy was being dismissed by some, such as Nakae Chōmin, and affirmed by others, like Inoue Tetsujirō. In either case, prevailing consensus on the historical reconstruction of premodern sources of philosophy in Japan saw the Confucian tradition as pre-eminent, thus linking Japanese intellectual history closely to the Chinese. In the following decades, as the idea of a distinctively *Japanese* tradition of philosophical thought gained strength, so, too, did the task of returning to the founders of Buddhist sects in Japan. Watsuji seems to have been the first explicitly to explore the possibilities Dōgen offered in this regard. Tanabe shared the general idea, but it took him some time before he singled out Dōgen out as *the* source of Japanese philosophy.

Tanabe is said to have become acquainted with Zen quite early, through his father. His first published remarks on Zen, however, only appear a few years before his book on Dōgen. Prevailing currents of thought indeed offer a background against which to read what he has to say of Zen, but Tanabe's interest in topics like society, history, culture, and politics demonstrates a far reaching interest in Japanese philosophy

8. On Yodono, see R. MÜLLER, "La religion et la philosophie de Dōgen" (Paris: *Résau Asie*, 2007, forthcoming).

9. YODONO Yōjun 淀野耀淳, 「道元の宗教及哲学」[The religion and philosophy of Dōgen], 『東洋哲学』[Eastern philosophy] 18/3-7, no. 4, 22.

that is equally important in explaining his interest in Dōgen as one of the sources of Japanese philosophy. At the same time, the intellectual tides and cultural “urgency” of the day help illumine the reasons for Tanabe’s forceful and yet somewhat *forced* reading of the *Shōbōgenzō*. While the *forced* reading will be addressed first, it must be remarked that both Zen and Dōgen remain so influential on Tanabe’s thought that it is even possible, as Himi Kiyoshi 氷見 潔 has pointed out, to read his 1946 masterpiece, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, as a series of paradoxes, or *kōan*, guiding reason to the realization of the “fundamental and intrinsic contradictoriness of reality as such,” that is, to a *genjōkōan* 現成公案—an obvious allusion to a term coined in the *Shōbōgenzō*. Without questioning the *forceful* nature of Tanabe’s 1939 interpretation of Dōgen as a philosopher and its lasting impact, it needs to be evaluated alongside the later efforts of philosophers both East and West.

The initial stimulus for Tanabe’s work on Dōgen was a summer meeting of the Committee for the Promotion of Science, hosted by the Japanese Ministry of Cultural Affairs in July of 1938. He delivered a lecture entitled “The Predecessor of Japanese Philosophy,” which in turn formed the basis for an essay published in October of that year in the journal *Philosophical Studies* as “The Philosophy of the Eihei *Shōbōgenzō*.” A mere seven months later, in May 1939, Tanabe published a revised and expanded version with the Iwanami publishing house, *My View on the Philosophy of the Shōbōgenzō*. In its preface, dated March of that year, he thanked his “friend Watsuji Tetsurō” for the inspiration to compose a treatise on Dōgen, an inspiration that took almost twenty years to reach book form. It is included in volume 5 of Tanabe’s collected works.

The original text consists of six chapters spanning 104 pages.¹⁰ After a short preface, Tanabe devotes ten pages to “Tradition and the Fate of Japanese Thought,” and fifteen pages to “The *Shōbōgenzō* of Dōgen, the Predecessor of Japanese Philosophy,” a previously published section. He then devotes twenty pages to “The Absolute Mediation of *Dōtoku*” (道得, or “the perfect expression of truth”). The second half of the book

10. TANABE Hajime, 『正法眼蔵の哲学私観』[My view on the philosophy of the *Shōbōgenzō*, PS] (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1939).

deals with “The Historicity of the Absolute,” “The Passage of Time,” and “The Standpoint of the Absolute Reality.”

Even though Tanabe broadens and deepens his interpretation of Dōgen in the course of the text, his way of reading only becomes clear in the course of his third chapter on Dōgen’s idea of language. I will take up the first half of the text where we can see connections to his ideas on the tradition and fate of Japanese thought. Indeed, it seems to me that any systematic treatment of Tanabe’s interpretation will have to focus on this section. The issue of temporality, a much debated topic ever since the rediscovery of Dōgen, accounts for the bulk of the second half of the text. There Tanabe raises questions with reference to Heidegger and parallel to his own philosophy of time. Dōgen’s interpreters regularly point to the significance of the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle *Uji* (有時), a text acknowledged as outstanding in the history Buddhist literature for its peculiar exploration of the relation of existence (*u* 有) and time (*ji* 時). For this reason, it tends to be treated independently of the other fascicles. Moreover, it is easy to regard this part of Dōgen’s thought as philosophical, given its evident links to the contemporary Western discourse on time.

If, however, we approach the basic question of how to treat Dōgen’s thought—or at least his main work, *Shōbōgenzō*—as a *whole* in terms of its relation to *philosophy*, a different approach is called for. Language offers a good approach here, both because language itself is a necessary, and perhaps even sufficient, means to philosophize, and because Dōgen himself is concerned with scripture and spoken words in the transmission of Buddhist *truth*. As has often been remarked, Dōgen’s use of language and his ingenuity with words are astonishing. Yet few interpreters have come to grips with this fact on *philosophical* grounds. In particular, no one, at least to my knowledge, has carried on the analysis of the term *dōtoku* and the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle of the same name that Watsuji and Tanabe initiated.¹¹ Focusing on language (*dōtoku*) can help us to place

11. See the analysis of Dōgen by Hee-Jin KIM based, in part, on his dissertation, “‘The Reason of Words and Letters’: Dōgen and Kōan Language,” in William LAFLEUR, *Dōgen Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1985). Kim mentions, but does not discuss, Watsuji’s interpretation of *dōtoku* 道得, despite the apparent debt

Dōgen’s writings in proper proximity to our notions of philosophy; it also opens a panorama on the whole of the *Shōbōgenzō*. On both counts, we are doing something quite different from focusing thematically on an intrinsically philosophical question like time.

Treating the *Shōbōgenzō* as a philosophical masterpiece departs from two more common approaches: the social scientific view that takes the text simply as a historical object (for examination in fields like philology, buddhology, and so on); and the view of adherents of the Sōtō sect that hold the contents and presentation of the book in less than adequately critical veneration. As is the case with other “scriptures,” it was long forbidden to print the *Shōbōgenzō*, with the result that the book remained hidden in monasteries for centuries. Tanabe addresses both of these concerns, defending himself, first of all, against accusations from the side of the faithful. He admits to being a “man without relation to a religious sect,” and states that he would “not know how the teachings of the founder Dōgen are dealt with nowadays in the Sōtō sect, or how the *Shōbōgenzō* is being interpreted.”¹² How could he, as a layman and *mongekan* 門外漢, read the *Shōbōgenzō* from a philosophical point of view? Would this not amount to simple “blasphemy”?

For Tanabe, following Watsuji’s lead, it seemed a matter of duty that he uncover a previously hidden side in Dōgen in order to “honor” him as the precursor of Japanese philosophy. This, in turn, would serve to “reinforce the general self-confidence of the Japanese towards their speculative abilities.”¹³ This, of course, is not an *argument* for reading Dōgen as a philosopher, but it does show what was motivating Tanabe. Another motivation, and one more closely linked to the history of philosophy, was the desire to demonstrate the significance of the *Shōbōgenzō* for modern philosophy as such, to argue that it points beyond Japan and has a contribution to make to Western philosophy as well.

Tanabe himself points to still another aspect of his extra-confessional

to the latter’s thought. Recent publications by Rolf Elberfeld, Steven Heine, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Carl Olson draw on Kim’s work but do not deploy his remarkable analysis.

12. TANABE, PS, i-ii.

13. TANABE, PS, i.

approach. Not only is he not an adherent of Sōtō Zen or familiar with how the sect treats Dōgen's teaching, but he lacks the *experiential* background in that he does not practice *zazen*,¹⁴ an apparent prerequisite for accessing the relevant dimensions of a text like the *Shōbōgenzō*. Tanabe's critics often return to the neglect of these three aspects, beginning with Masunaga Reihō 増永靈鳳 (1902–1981), who complained as early as 1939 that in Tanabe's reading of Dōgen "the domain of religion is diminished, if not replaced, by philosophy."¹⁵ From the side of the faithful, this represents the core of their critique of the philosopher's reading of Dōgen.

Others have argued in a similar vein. James W. Heisig quotes a student of Tanabe's: "Shida Shōzō traces Tanabe's route to Dōgen through Watsuji and seems to reflect the general opinion of scholars in the field that his commentaries are more a platform for his own philosophy than they are a fair appraisal of Dōgen's own views."¹⁶ Shida's comments should stand as a warning against an uncritical approach to Dōgen. His basic idea is that Tanabe's treatment undercuts the autonomy of religion, in effect converting all of the *Shōbōgenzō* into philosophy. The same complaint is raised against Watsuji, though he does not offer any detailed argument for either claim. Nonetheless, his view of Tanabe and Watsuji needs to be set in against a more general background of the neglect of Tanabe's interpretation of Dōgen, particular among Western scholars. Even where he is cited as an authority to shore up one or the other conclusion, the grounds for doing so lie outside of Tanabe's own philosophical arguments.

To approach Tanabe's own reading of Dōgen with any philosophical rigor, then, we need to address this criticism without letting it eclipse his contribution altogether. Tanabe's interpretation is a useful model, despite the fact that it reflects the turbulent times in which it was written, especially in its tendency to incorporate Dōgen's views into Tanabe's

14. Cf. TANABE, PS, ii.

15. MASUNAGA Reihō 増永靈鳳「田辺元博士著『正法眼蔵の哲学私観』『宗教研究』[Religious studies] 3 (1939), 628.

16. J. W. HEISIG, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 324.

particular frame of interests. Even so, if it is hard to agree with much of Tanabe's interpretation, it should be noted that he himself was well aware of the difficulties of his undertaking. He states at the outset that his treatise will not encompass the whole of the life work of Dōgen or even the whole of the *Shōbōgenzō*. In fact, he does not even treat its ideas systematically,¹⁷ preferring to see his work more as a preliminary attempt open to later revision.

At the same time Tanabe takes a critical stance towards his “fellow” scholar, Watsuji, insofar as the latter opts to read Dōgen from the standpoint of a historian rather than from that of a philosopher. Watsuji is correct in the sense that the *Shōbōgenzō* is a particular text composed at a particular period in Japan's past. But it deserves to be treated, Tanabe insists, as a text of the greatest importance for modern philosophy both East and West. In his view, the text outshines its counterparts in the depth of its speculation.¹⁸

THE CONTEXT OF TANABE'S WORK

By putting the question of culture at the beginning of his analysis of Dōgen, Tanabe signaled that his interest in Dōgen relates to a larger concern about Japanese tradition and the position of Japan within world culture. While the ambivalence of the imperatives that derive from this concern became clear by the end of the war, in the 1930s they could still be seen as fostering the idea of Japanese intervention in the global crisis occasioned by the Western *Zeitgeist*. After the defeat of China and Russia, Japanese military and economical self-assertion could be (and by the nationalists, was) construed as a readiness to “help out” intellectually and culturally on a global scale. For Tanabe, Japan's assimilation of Chinese culture over the centuries were a prototype of the way Japan could play an intermediary role in global culture—for instance, by using Japanese Buddhism as a basis to incorporate Western philosophy. Tanabe

17. Cf. TANABE, PS, iii.

18. TANABE, PS, iii.

points in particular to Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, which he sees as more suited to the task than Western metaphysics.

“Culture,” Tanabe asserted, “constitutes itself generally as a synthesis of adopting tradition and deploying individuality.”¹⁹ One such individuality is represented by the monk Dōgen, whose works display both the adoption of Chinese Buddhism and the engagement of a specific Japanese strain of thinking. Eight hundred years later, Buddhism would once again be called on to play a distinctive role:

Japanese Buddhism is the evolution of Buddhism and therein the evolution of Japanese thought. By embracing and assimilating Buddhism as one of the world religions, Japanese thinking as such develops and realizes a global character. Through opening up itself in such a manner, Japan—as a particular species—becomes part of mankind by way of an individual's creation [此様に自己を開くことに依って特殊的種としての日本が、個人の創造を通じて人類的となるのである].²⁰

As we have noted, however, Tanabe's allegiance to Japanese tradition was ensnared in a political position as well. In 1937, two years before the Dōgen book, Tanabe wrote a response to Minoda Muneki 蓑田胸喜, a nationalist defender of the emperor system who had accused Tanabe of intellectual treason. In it we find the following sentence: “I believe it is no exaggeration to call the 95-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō* of Dōgen the treasure-house of dialectics in Japan.”²¹ He attempted to legitimize his idea of the dialectic of “absolute mediation” by appealing to traditional Japanese sources. Well versed in Hegel and Marx, Tanabe nevertheless seemed to need this connection to the past in time of war so as not to run the danger of being called a traitor for using Western terms laden with political overtones. His reaction to Minoda backs up ideas developed in essays composed the year before (1936). There he mentions in passing the importance of *zazen* for politicians and intellectuals of the Meiji period. They possessed the wisdom, Tanabe argued, to open themselves to Western science and thinking at the same time as they

19. TANABE PS, I.

20. TANABE PS, 6.

21. THZ VIII: 17.

nourished their minds by sitting in meditation.²² Still, to an ultra-nationalist like Minoda, Tanabe's plea for a critical adoption of Western culture smacked of submissiveness.

In a 1936 essay entitled "Common Sense, Philosophy, and Science," Tanabe discussed Eastern thought in contrast to Western philosophy, pointing to Buddhist wisdom as a "commonsense correlative to philosophy" insofar as its knowledge is mediated by action. In it he set the deeper wisdom of Zen in stark contrast to any kind of mysticism:

In the same way that common sense is living knowledge, this philosophy [of Zen Buddhist wisdom] is living philosophy. The wisdom of this philosophy is not conceptually organized as a system of thought, but is, in the end, expressed in action. In Zen, a blow with the stick or a shout suffices to express the truth perfectly [*dōtoku* 道得]. The intertwining of language [*gonji no kattō* 言辞の葛藤] is only of secondary importance.²³

Already here, one notices an appreciation of the Buddhist tradition that is to increase in later works: it seems to have a quality missing in modern Western science, even though admittedly it lacks an adequate conceptual framework to express it as such.

We should note that what Tanabe has to say here about the use of the stick and the shouting differs from his future stance towards Rinzai practice. A year later, in 1937, he gave a different twist to the relation of language and the expression of truth, that is to *kattō* 葛藤, the intertwining of language, and *dōtoku* 道得, verbal expression perfected to voice the truth. He drew on Dōgen as a Zen monk who gave primacy of place to language, that is, to a symbolic system that reaches beyond the expressive use of the stick and shouting. Once again, I cite a passage from his response to Minoda Muneki, in which he puts Japanese Buddhism in broad perspective, concluding with a remark on Dōgen's dialectics:

Shōtoku Taishi may be thought to have incorporated Mahāyāna Buddhism into the Japanese spirit; through him Japanese culture advanced from a state of immediacy to a mode of mediation by absolute nega-

22. Cf. THZ V: 264.

23. THZ V: 203.

tion. This did not, of course, leave ancient Shintō unchanged. One may even say that Shōtoku Taishi opened up the truth of Shintō and elevated the concreteness of the Japanese spirit. If so, we must assume that the dialectics of absolute negation is the philosophical method of Japanese thinking. To deploy this logic as logic and to call it dialectic means to mediate Japanese thinking by Western philosophy, a way of thinking that is found throughout Mahāyāna Buddhism. For this reason I find it no exaggeration to call the 95-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō* of Dōgen the treasure-house of dialectics in Japan. Therein the intertwining of truth is at once its perfect expression [*kattō ha sunawachi dōtoku* 葛藤は即ち道得]. The residuum of being that Hegel's dialectics leaves is wiped out and completely turned into nothing; the transformative mediation of absolute emptiness is realized.”²⁴

Leaving aside the tangled phrases of the passage, it seems clear that Tanabe gives Buddhism the function of unraveling the “genuine” quality of the Japanese being and places Dōgen at the end of a process in which the “foreign” sources of Buddhism are perfectly assimilated and made into something new, which in turn equips Japanese culture to process Western science and philosophy. With Buddhism, the meaning of Japan's “native” thought and religion (Shinto) becomes “concrete,” or, in dialectical terms, it breaks through its immediacy and arrives at a state of reflection. Zen, as part of the same movement, shows up in Dōgen's work with a different quality, transformed from the immediate expression of truth through gesture (shouting, use of the stick, and so on) into “reflexive expression” by language. In this way Tanabe elevates “the intertwining of truth by language” to “its perfect expression.”

ASPECTS OF THE INTERPRETATION OF DŌGEN

Tanabe alludes to Dōgen towards the end of a series of articles in which he tries to ground his philosophy systematically through a scheme developed in confrontation with Hegel and serving to distance himself from Nishida's “logic of place.” He called his scheme a “logic

24. THZ VIII: 17.

of species.” Concretely, his aim is to present a different appreciation of religion, particularly of Buddhism—different, that is, from Nishida’s. As is well known, Nishida was fond of Zen, having practiced *zazen* for years and been a close friend of Suzuki Daisetsu, the most celebrated advocate of Zen in the Western world. Like Suzuki he was affiliated with the Rinzai lineage and refers most often in his writings to its patriarchs.

Tanabe “opposes” their appreciation of Zen by centering attention on the founder of the Sōtō sect, Dōgen. He contends that the practice of Zen, in particular Rinzai Zen, tends to be confused with a direct access to the absolute. By way of *kōan* training, the practicing subject seems to gain the ability to intuit the divine. In Tanabe’s view, Nishida grounds his philosophy on such an attitude of self-empowerment towards the absolute.²⁵ He therefore criticizes his teacher for conflating religion and philosophy in his advocacy of a union between the intuiting subject and the absolute. The general outlines of Tanabe’s critique is well known. What is less known is the fact that Dōgen comes into play here, showing up where one would normally expect the name of Shinran, the founder of Pure Land Buddhism: it is to Dōgen that Tanabe appeals when he constructs his idea of the relation between the finite and the infinite.

Simply put, in contrast to the idea of self-power, Shinran teaches a submissive attitude towards the absolute, a way of complete and unqualified surrender to the salvific power of Amida Buddha. In place of Nishida’s aesthetic approach to the sublime, which Tanabe felt skewed it into a religious world view, Tanabe, particularly in his later works, favors a form of religious experience that symbolizes the hardships of our fleeting existence. It is this experience that brings the human being up against its limits, with no other way of escape than rescue by Amida Buddha. Unselfish ethical action is the only way we have to collaborate in our own salvation.

En route to this devotional stance, Tanabe encounters Dōgen who he calls on to bridge the gap between the polar opposites of Rinzai and Shinran. Tanabe highlights the middle position of Dōgen, stressing both ethical deeds as the will to submit completely to this life and rational

25. Cf. TANABE PS, chap. 3.

expression of the basic mode of our existence. He interprets a crucial term of Dōgen's, *genjōkōan*,²⁶ as signalling the apparently insurmountable contradiction of life. Dōgen, he argues, recognizes the bounds of human reason that cannot be overcome by any critical self-assertion of the finite subject. By setting Dōgen up in a middle ground between the two other monks, Tanabe attributes to him implicitly the role of the “specific” that mediates their relationship to one another.

Mediated relationships are a basic feature of Tanabe's philosophy of that period. This is why he does not ask if Dōgen's work *is* philosophy, but rather if he can be treated as *belonging* (*zoku suru* 属する) to philosophy,²⁷ that is, as capable of being subsumed in or otherwise related to philosophy. Before he gives his answer in the affirmative, Tanabe takes a step back and thinks through what religion and philosophy mean “Religion and philosophy,” he states, “stand in *relation*”²⁸ to one another, in that each in its own way “makes the *relation* between the absolute and the relative the crucial problem”²⁹ to be resolved. It is possible to see Tanabe's thought as revolving around the idea of “relation,”³⁰ which puts him in line with “modern” philosophy's tendency to give the idea of relation priority over that of substance. Whatever Tanabe's own debt to Hegel, it is really only since Hegel that “relation” and “relatedness” have taken a positive role in ontology as opposed to being viewed as mere derivatives of substance.³¹

But how to understand the *relationships* between religion and philos-

26. TANABE PS, 95.

27. TANABE PS, 12.

28. *Ibid*; emphasis added.

29. *Ibid*; emphasis added.

30. As suggested in HEISIG, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 116ff.

31. In the twentieth century, relation becomes explicitly a term of debate as for example in Ernst CASSIRER's work; see, for example, his “Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff” of 1910. Others like Bernhard WELTE point to consequences of this shift to “relation” for philosophy of religion and regard it as a schema to divide the history of philosophy in two opposed views; cf. “Relation” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* VIII: 600–2. In most positive appraisals, “relation” is taken to be the basic principle to set up a “pluralistic” concept for our *Weltverstehen*; insofar as it constitutes the base of our understanding, it serves, or is supposed to serve, as the unifying principle.

ophy, between the absolute and the relative or relatives? Tanabe uses a wide range of expressions to address the question. In many cases he stresses a seemingly paradoxical relatedness, according to which both religion and philosophy, both absolute and relative, exist independently of themselves but not without depending intrinsically on their opposite. One hears a faint echo of the familiar, if rarely critically examined, “paradoxical logic” of Buddhism in Tanabe’s adoption of the copulative *soku* 即: “The term *soku* signifies a *relation*, in which the opposites unite.”³² In the strictly logical sense of a unification of non-identical contradictories, it is hard to make sense of such a relation.³³ And Tanabe is not about to deny the usefulness of the principles of analytical logic. His aim is rather to show the limits of that utility, drawing on seemingly nonsensical phrases to highlight the boundaries of its validity. This suggests that it may be helpful to translate *soku* (as well as *sōsoku* 相即) at times in more positive terms as “correlation” or “mutual relation” in order to show this aspect of complementary dependency.

Returning to Tanabe’s distinction between religion and philosophy, he writes that philosophy is “correlated to religion in its aim at understanding the absolute meaning of historical reality,”³⁴ which is considered “relative.” In other words, the standpoint of philosophy is set squarely within history, the only place there is to seek the absolute. The absolute is not to be located in a world beyond but in the relativity of the here and now. From a philosophical standpoint, it is never possible to reach the absolute, only perpetually to seek it. In the striving, one is forever bound to the limits of human existence. Contrary, but not contradictory, to this, human finitude is overcome in religion as one lets go of reliance on one’s own power and submits, in an act of repentance, to the absolute. It is an act of self-negation admitting one’s temporal and factual inability to overcome one’s finitude. At the same time, the absolute is dependent on the relative insofar as it is dependent on a spontaneous

32. THZ v: 202; emphasis added.

33. Nicholas JONES walks us through different argumentations of how to appropriately grasp *soku* in logical terms: “The Logic of *Soku* in the Kyoto School,” *Philosophy East and West* 54/3 (2004).

34. TANABE PS, 12–13.

act of repentance, that is, an act of autonomous submission performed by a relative being. This relationship is not a static one; by nature it is dynamic, propelled by the momentum of negation and mutual mediation through negation between the absolute and the relative.

Tanabe considers Buddhism close to philosophy in the sense that it holds knowledge based on wisdom to be a means of becoming a Buddha.³⁵ This is clear in Dōgen, who left behind a massive body of written work, composed in a style that is not just enigmatic preaching but a rational and analytic attempt to explain the world in a Buddhist way. This is the basis for Tanabe's placement of Dōgen in opposition to Rinzai. As he sees it, the mediation between the relative and the absolute in the Rinzai sect is executed only expressively—for example, in using a stick or shouting loudly to arouse one to awakening. In contrast, Tanabe has this to say of Dōgen's *dōtoku*, the perfect expression of truth:

If we take the word *dōtoku* in its literal sense as a dialogical mediation of speech, then, according to Dōgen, the truth of the Buddha is not limited to become aware of it in a sudden awakening in accord with the traditional dictum about “not relying on words and letters, pointing directly to the heart of man, seeing one's own nature and becoming Buddha.” It is clear that Dōgen takes the road of philosophy in order to penetrate the dialogical dialectic thoroughly. This dialectic is carried through by questioning and answering relatives set in opposition to one another.³⁶

Despite Tanabe's talk of relatives, it requires *qualified* relatives to turn the give-and-take of a simple dialogue into an expression of truth. This is the task of the bodhisattvas (awakened beings) who remain in the human world, the realm of constant flux. Bodhisattvas continue in their practice of the Buddhist path even though they have already crossed over to salvation. They have experienced the extraordinary, but choose to stay behind in the ordinary world in order to promote the salvation of all sentient beings. This is what Tanabe has in mind when he writes that “talk and non-talk correlate, the absolute and the relative, mediate one

35. Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

36. *Ibid.*, 19.

another.”³⁷ This manifests “the discourse of philosophy that corresponds to ‘going beyond Buddha’” as the ongoing practice of the way in this life. In terms of ethical work undertaken for the good of all sentient beings “religion is mediated with philosophy.”³⁸ Tanabe writes:

As Dōgen clearly states: “The wonders that the Buddhas and patriarchs hold up in the air and turn around is knowledge and understanding.” Truly, his *Shōbōgenzō* shows the highest approximation to dialectical speculation.³⁹

Here again we come up against the nearly impenetrable density of Tanabe’s wording. One is often hard put to paraphrase in straightforward language what it is that makes him see (his own) dialectical method reflected in Dōgen’s words.

We recall that he had placed Dōgen in a middle ground between Rinzai and Shinran. Elsewhere he puts him in a similar relation to Shinran and Nichiren:

All three founders of Japanese Buddhism appearing almost at the same time in the Kamakura period—Dōgen, Shinran, and Nichiren—correspond in the logical relation of their thought as genus, individual and species, respectively. This may seem only coincidence, but one may also see a deeper meaning in it. Would it be wrong to say, that, from this point of view, the perfection of Japanese Buddhism is achieved on the basis of these three being unified in reciprocal transformation?⁴⁰

Tanabe leaves open the question of how to mediate the three syllogistically. That he might have an answer to this can be inferred from a third, and more detailed, instance of the application of the same schema in which he takes up the relationships between Shinran’s notions of religious act, faith, and witness.⁴¹

Be that as it may, Dōgen’s most marked difference from Shinran and Nichiren lies in his philosophical work, in which he “masters the Japa-

37. *Ibid.*, 19.

38. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 20.

41. Cf. *ibid.*, 54.

nese language freely, enlivens logic and makes the unspoken and unexplained manifest through words and talk.”⁴² Exactly how he does this needs further investigation. The repeated use of the same simple *and* complex framework detailed above gives us reason to take a critical look at Tanabe’s enterprise. That said, however, his conviction that Dōgen’s use and reflection of language should itself be seen as a perfect expression of Buddhist truth obliges us to a closer look at this matter as a philosophical question. In particular, we need to flesh out the picture of just *how* Dōgen sees language expressing truth. Tanabe’s book offers some general ideas about what such an analysis would look like; further scrutiny, I am persuaded, will lead us to reconsider Tanabe’s problematic about how this can, and how it cannot, be worked out. This task, the more difficult side of interpreting Dōgen and interpreting Tanabe’s reading of him, remains to be done.

42. *Ibid.*, 20.